

Sermon File # 1287

Scripture Text: I Corinthians 13

Sermon Title: *Christianity Minus Love Equals Zero*

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Christianity Minus Love Equals Zero

Today we'll, we'll consider a third passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the great 13th chapter, known as the Love Chapter. Although a digression from the subject of spiritual gifts in chapters 14 and 15, this 13th chapter is actually the most important aspect of Paul's argument. Paul eloquently describes the unique Christian virtue of agape love, which is more important than all the spiritual gifts so coveted by the Corinthians.

Follow as I read **1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13**.

One commentator (Richard Hays) says we need to rescue 1 Corinthians 13 from sentimental associations with wedding ceremonies, with sweet kisses, flowers, and frilly bridal dresses. Well, I still think the great Love Chapter has a place in wedding ceremonies, as long as the bride and groom understand the kind of love this chapter is describing. The love Paul describes in this great 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians is the love that actually contains the essence of the Christian life.

Love is a misunderstood and misused word in the English language. The Koine Greek uses at least four words to cover the concepts that we intend with our one word, "love." (See *The Four Loves*, by CS Lewis, and his discussion of affection, friendship, eros and charity/agape). On the other hand, we use the same English word to describe a whole range of meaning for love, all the way from sexual lust to delight in chocolates and ice cream and to sacrificial involvement in meeting the needs of others, even our enemies, which is the love Paul describes.

“Agape” is the word used in this chapter and used most frequently when talking about the love that characterizes God and that is to characterize the believer. This is the love that is the *sine qua non* of the Christian life, and is characterized by a selfless concern for the welfare of others, without regard for the deserving or response of the ones loved. This is the love that God defines.

Paul Scherer, in his book, *The Word God Sent*, in a sermon on 1 John 4:8, says this statement, “God is love,” doesn’t tell us primarily about God. God is *love*, but also much more. God is holiness, power, wisdom, and so forth. This brief statement, however, is the greatest thing that can be said about love. So, we should read, “*God is love.*” When we have said *God is love* we have said all that can possibly be said about love—its selfless sacrifice, practicality, reach, depth, longsuffering and much more. Love is revealed supremely on the Cross, and is the love God commands us to have toward one another (1 John 4:7, John 13:34-35)

In our text Paul twice uses the word “nothing.” Without love we are nothing and gain nothing, he says. Paul says that without love Christianity is nothing. Christianity minus love equals zero, first of all (in verses 1-3) because...

Without love there is *no help to the church* (verses 1-3)

As we noted from 1 Corinthians 12, the criterion for the legitimacy of spiritual gifts is whether or not they help to build up the church. In Corinth there were church members who were causing divisions in the fellowship, and promoting themselves and their gifts as superior to others with their “lesser” gifts. The gifts of the proud in Corinth seemed to be gifts of speech. Eloquence and ecstatic speech were admired abilities and gifts. Gifted orators had status similar to super athletes and cinema and music celebrities in our culture. Paul is saying that regardless of how important you think you are, without love there is absolutely no help to the church. In fact, there’s harm being done to the church...

In its communication

Paul frequently uses images, analogies and illustrations from the local culture, and here he refers to the local industry of manufacturing bronze products, used in the theater and in music. The resounding gong may have been a large brass megaphone used to project the voices of the actors in a theater, and the clanging symbol was a brass instrument used to create excitement in pagan worship, and perhaps also putatively to scare away demons!

No doubt Paul was alluding to the sophists and “super apostles” who had been calling attention to themselves and belittling the authority of Paul. He was saying their outward abilities and actions were self-serving and self-centered and were of no more use than noisy “demon-chasers.”

Without love, Paul says in verse 1, there is no help to the church, first of all in their important work of communication. The Corinthian “spirituals” prided themselves in their ecstatic speech, and called it the “tongues of angels.” Paul said that the use of speech without love is like the noisy sound in pagan worship. (William Barclay, in his

Daily Study Bible, notes that in the pagan worship of Cybele and Dionysus in Corinth, there was a speaking in ecstatic languages accompanied by clanging symbols, smashing gongs, and blaring trumpets). Such speech is well amplified but meaningless. That sounds a lot like much popular music in western culture today! There is a word here for me as a pastor and preacher. If I had the eloquence and mind of a George Whitefield, a CH Spurgeon, or Billy Graham, without love these gifts would amount to nothing.

Paul might have employed the analogy of musical instruments because there were people in the church at Corinth who were gifted with “angelic speech” and were talented musically but bereft of love. They might have wanted to lead in worship just to showcase their talent, all the while failing to love their fellow believers. Perhaps they could write or play beautiful music, even about the love of God or about their love for God. But Paul says that to God it’s just sentimental noise. Like the knowledge of the Gnostics, it would be impressive sounding but theologically and biblically empty. One pastor noted that churches with division in their fellowship are often filled with people who are zealous for the gifts of the Spirit but are careless of the graces of the Spirit, as was the case in Corinth (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Wise: 1 Corinthians*).

The apostle John says the way we sort out the sentimental “love songs and sounds” is whether or not the individual loves God. He writes “This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands” (1 John 5:2). “Don’t try to impress me with your beautiful music or sermons about love,” John and Paul would say, “if you don’t love God by obeying his word by doing good to your fellow believer.”

Without love, even the greatest preaching and music is nothing before God. In fact, without love, our singing and preaching and teaching are abhorrent to him. This seems to be the gist of Isaiah’s and Jesus’ pronouncements on empty religious performance (Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:7-9). Without love there is no help to the church in its communication. And, as Paul says in verse 2, without love there is no help to the church...

In its information

Without love there is no help to the church in communication and also there is no help to the church in the realm of information. Paul writes about those who have prophetic insight, and who can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge (verse 2). He is saying that even with all biblical and spiritual information, without love, we are useless to the Body of Christ.

I recall a lady in a previous church we served who was one of the most critical people I have ever known. She could find something wrong with everything and everybody. She claimed to have the gift of wisdom and knowledge, yet she was lacking in love, and thus no one ever listened to her knowledge. You could possibly have great insight and knowledge, even in the Scriptures, yet without love your points will not be well taken! People will perceive you as negative and ignore your information.

There are a lot of people in the churches today who are walking encyclopedias of biblical truth, and who attend and even teach Bible studies on more days than there are in a week, yet they are devoid of love. They have no inclination to practice what they already know. They want to impress others and maybe themselves with their biblical information. Paul says that without the grace and virtue of love they are no help to the church. And without love there is no help to the church...

In its inspiration

He says this is true, not only with communication and information, but also in the realm of inspiration. In verse 2 the great apostle describes the inadequacy of a loveless faith that could move mountains. Notice what Paul says about inspiration without love:

“If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

The Message reads, “If I speak God’s Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, “Jump,” and it jumps, but I don’t love, I’m nothing.”

It’s possible even to have faith to move mountains, yet to be bereft of love is to amount to zero as far as the church is concerned. There are those of great faith who can inspire others to have faith, yet without love they are problematic to the church. Some may have a great vision for our church, yet because of the lack of love will never have the opportunity for their vision to be shared. I have known of church members who had great gifts of leadership, but because their hearts were not right before God, their giftedness became detrimental to the church and destructive of its unity and fellowship. One’s vision lacks credibility if there is no love.

Hudson Armerding, past president of Wheaton College, says love makes missionaries, not visionaries (page 79, *Leadership*). Some of these visionaries are greedy televangelists, perhaps the modern counterparts to the “super apostles” that plagued Paul, who inspire and dupe widows to donate their small pensions to their big financial schemes, which stand as monuments to personal greed and corruption. Only with love does your life make a lasting difference in the life of the kingdom of God. You may have a vision, but without love you won’t be involved in loving ministry to people necessary for your vision to be credible. And without love, there is no help to the church...

In its dedication

Even great acts of charity, self-sacrifice and self-inflicted hardship for the sake of others are all empty and appear as empty boasting without love (3). Paul is not minimizing sacrificial living and giving. In fact, if we love God, we love to give, and we give sacrificially, as Jesus and Paul both teach us. Paul is saying that some people can out-give us in amounts but may do so with the wrong motives. The experience of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 tells us that giving with the wrong motive can be a dangerous gesture! And in this Love Chapter, Paul says that giving without love for God and his people is of no value in God’s sight. We all know about

those who give in order to be recognized or to gain inordinate influence in the church. Such people expect an immediate “return on their investment,” and therefore have no eternal reward awaiting them (Matthew 6:1).

The Macedonian believers are commended for the proper motive for giving, which was sacrificial and even cheerful giving in grateful response to the grace of God (2 Corinthians 8 & 9). We who also have come to receive the grace of the one who became poor for our sake, should give cheerfully, generously, and even sacrificially with the right motive of loving gratitude! The Apostle’s point in our text, however, is that giving everything and even giving oneself in martyrdom, without love equals nothing. Without love, even with all our talent, leadership, influence, and dedication to the institution, we can cause more harm than good to the fellowship, as was the case in Corinth (chapter 11).

In verses 1-3, Paul is saying we need to stand back from our participation in church activities and ask ourselves, “Why am I doing this?” What is my motive for serving the Lord and for giving to the Lord? If it isn’t because I love the Lord and his people, then it amounts to zero.

Christianity without love amounts to zero. And as Paul says further in verses 4-7...

Without love there is *no holiness for the believer* (verses 4-7)

The Corinthians were proud of their superficial spiritual knowledge, which gave them no concern for the wellbeing of others. Paul said there that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (8:1). Without love believers cannot grow in spiritual maturity nor can we positively contribute to the growth of the church as the body of Christ. We may think we’re superior because we seem bigger in our own eyes, but our size is merely fat, and not the growth of muscle and bone. We’re just swollen with pride, and not strong in the Lord.

In verses 4-7, Paul says love is the overarching attribute that characterizes all the virtues of the Christian life. In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul lists love as the first of the fruit of the Spirit. And, in Colossians 3:14, he says love is to encompass and bind together all the other virtues. Love, he writes in Romans 13:10, is the fulfillment of the Law.

Without love, there can be no holiness, and...

Holiness is our calling

Our calling as believers is to be godly, which means God-like. Peter reminds us of our calling to be the holy, i.e. separated people of God (1 Peter 1:15-16). We are called to be holy in the same ways God is holy. Just as the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 also describes the character of Jesus, so also Jesus’ character is described in verses 4-7 of our text.

Someone has said that substituting the name of Jesus for the word “love” in these verses makes absolutely good sense. We could without misrepresentation say,

“Jesus is patient and Jesus is kind. He does not envy, does not boast, and is not proud, rude, or self-seeking.” Jesus is the perfect embodiment of love. In 1 John 4, the Apostle says God is love, and we are to love others so the love of God can be seen in us. When we love we allow others to see Jesus in us. Jesus commands us to love one another as he has loved us, and by our love for one another all will know we are his disciples (John 13:34 & 35). Love is the essence of holiness, which is our calling as believers. And...

Holiness is to be our character

A.W. Tozer warns that by substituting Jesus' name for love here in 1 Corinthians (as I did in the above paragraph) we are tempted to let ourselves off the hook (see chapter 35 in his *The Price of Neglect*). Jesus is indeed the perfect embodiment of the love described in the Love Chapter, yet each one of us is called to live by the same standard for love. The point Paul is making is that without love in our character we cannot be holy, and our Christianity is zero because we are not living up to our calling to holiness, the purpose of our salvation.

The description Paul gives of love in verses 4-7 is far from the notions of sentimental, self-serving love that makes us feel good about ourselves. Obviously, the description Paul gives of love's moral character is in stark contrast to the sentimental notions of love in our culture, even in our evangelical Christian culture. We have reduced love to an emotional, sentimental feeling, and have removed love from the biblical notion of obedience to the word of God.

The agape-type of love that God has for us and requires us to have for one another is anything but sentimental. It is sacrificial involvement in meeting the needs of others, regardless of their deserving. The apostle John makes this very clear in his first letter. God loved us in this way through the sacrifice of Christ, and we are to love one another with the same sense of unselfish involvement in meeting the needs of others (1 John 4:7-12).

Ironically, an arena of life where Christian love can best flourish and also die is in the relationship of marriage. Paul writes that Christian marriage is to mirror the love between Christ and his church (Ephesians 5:22-33). Yet we are too painfully aware that Christians are failing to keep the marriage commitment as frequently as are unbelievers.

A Christian marriage counselor in The Hague, Netherlands noted that she often reads 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 with a couple preparing for marriage. She reminds the couple that there are no warm, fuzzy ideas in this passage, such as buying flowers and romantic dinners and expensive gifts, important as it is to keep romance in marriage. What Paul refers to, says the counselor, is action. Paul says love is being patient when you feel impatient. It's being kind when you feel unkind, and keeping no score of wrongs when you feel like holding a grudge. This kind of love in action is not only how a marriage can survive, but also how it can thrive. The counselor concludes that this love, as a commitment to action, is the key to any relationship, even with one's enemies. And such love-in-action is possible only by the power of the Holy Spirit (This citation was found in a web site *Desperate Preacher*, provided by Frank Schaefer, 2004).

Perhaps one of the greatest examples of loving the needy is to be seen in the life and work of the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She literally poured out her life in selfless love to those dying in the streets of Calcutta, India. When she was being honored for her service to others, she replied with her characteristic humility: "I don't do big things. I do small things with big love." And this is the approach of our Lord Jesus who himself went about doing good (Acts 10:38). And he taught us that greatness is measured in being a servant to others (Matthew 20:26).

Is there ever a day when we are not faced with the choice of loving or ignoring a brother or sister in Christ? The opposite of agape love is not hatred, but indifference. And we are not acting in love if we see a need and then turn our backs on our brother or sister (1 John 3:16-18). Perhaps one of the dreadful moments of standing before the judgment seat of Christ will be to have to review the countless faces of our brothers and sisters who had needs we ignored or refused to meet, whether material or emotional or spiritual.

The life of love described in these verses is one of self-control, in terms of personal morality. Some of the Corinthians thought they could do whatever felt good, with no harm done. When we act in love, our lives honor God and others. Instead of being self-centered, we are self-giving (5). What a contrast this is to the "me-ism" mindset of today that causes people to abandon their families, with the intent of "fulfilling" oneself.

Years ago, one of our former assistant pastor's sons married a young lady, also from a good, strong Christian family. This young bride left her husband after less than a year of marriage. Like the young groom, this young lady came from a Christian home, yet she abandoned her marriage commitment because she said she wanted to find herself! Love that characterizes the believer doesn't find itself; it gives itself away to others—"it is not self-seeking."

Today Nancy and I are celebrating our wedding anniversary, and as never before our relationship is being sustained by a commitment we made 45 years ago to love, honor, sustain and be faithful to one another, in sickness as well as health, in bad times as well as good times, till death alone separates us.

One of my deacons at a former church, giving the secret of his 50-year-old marriage, said that he didn't believe in marriage and his wife didn't believe in murder!

Christian love, in any relationship, is often anything but sentimental. It's the love of the Christ of the cross. And the cross is the pattern for the love we are to have for one another, even in the little events of our lives. We love like Jesus when we endure disappointment and rejection by those we love. Christian love is often costly with little payback in this life. CS Lewis said, "The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell" (page 169, *The Four Loves*).

John Piper says that love is the "labor of Christian hedonism," and is "the overflow of joy in God that meets the needs of others. The overflow is experienced consciously as the pursuit of our joy in the joy of another. We double our delight in God as we

expand it in the lives of others” (page 121, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*). It’s impossible to practice love in a state of total disinterestedness or oblivion to the thought of God’s blessing and reward. It’s just the way God has chosen to bless and reward the believer’s acts of love. God will see to it that we “get a kick out of” ministry to others. Christian love cannot be practiced apart from our experiencing joy, which both delights and glorifies God.

Without love there is no holiness for the believer, and holiness, which has love as its core, is essential for passing the final judgment.

Love determines our holiness, and our...

Holiness will be the criterion for passing the judgment

Without love there is no holiness for the believer. “Without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). Jesus says that we will know true believers by their fruit, and this obviously refers to the fruit of godliness that Jesus is teaching about in the Sermon on the Mount. He then says “Not everyone who says ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”(Matthew 7:21).

We are saved by grace, but Jesus teaches that grace so unmistakably produces fruit that we will be judged by our fruitfulness, the fruit of works done in love (Matthew 25:31-46). When Peter talks about making our calling and election sure, he indicates that the abundance of godly virtues is the assurance of divine calling and election (2 Peter 1:5-11). In fact, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan in answer to the question of the legal expert, who asked about how to have eternal life. Jesus said, in effect, if you love your neighbor as this Samaritan loved his, you will give evidence of the grace of salvation (Luke 10:25-37).

Another question we need to ask ourselves, as we reflect on the validity of our Christianity, is “What am I becoming in my character?”

There are times in my life, I hate to admit, when I am distressed by something I’ve said or done that hurt or offended someone. When I retreat with myself after such low points I have asked myself, “What is becoming of me?” I have to ask myself at those moments what I am becoming, and realize how unlike Jesus I remain after many years of being his follower.

And finally (in verses 8-13), Paul says...

Without love there is *no hope for heaven* (verses 8-13)

In verses 8-13 Paul writes that without love there is no hope for heaven because...

Love is eternal

Paul is saying in these verses that love is the virtue that will outlast the spiritual gifts, intended to enable the church to do its mission in the Great Commission. Love also will outlast the graces of faith and hope. The Lord has loved us with an everlasting

love (Jeremiah 31:3). His love for us will never end. We will forever be the objects of his love.

John Calvin notes that faith is essential to enlist us into saving grace, and without faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior, there is no hope for heaven. But love will outlast faith and hope, which in heaven will be replaced by sight and absolute fulfillment of all our hopes (Volume 9, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*).

As love is eternal so...

The imperfect is temporal

Corinth was known, among other things, for its bronze works, which included bronze mirrors, which though highly polished, yielded only imperfect, obscure images. Were Paul writing verse 12 in our day, he would say, "Now we have only glass mirrors and photographs." Even with all our high tech cameras and video-projecting equipment, Paul would say to us, "You haven't seen anything yet!" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

The Bible is fully inspired, and is absolutely trustworthy, yet our understanding of it is imperfect. Jesus is the perfect revelation of God, yet our perception of him is by our faith, which is imperfect and always struggling and growing. The day is coming, however, when we shall see him face to face, and will be glorified, to know him perfectly, even as he now knows us perfectly. We will never be God or even "gods," nor will we know all that he knows. But what we will know will be perfect truth, without distortion and misunderstanding.

Paul's use of the imagery of childhood and putting away childish ways as an illustration of the transition to heaven was an intentional ruffling of the feathers of the proud Corinthians, who thought they knew it all (Hays). Paul says our living and serving by comparison to heaven is child's play. We don't have the final answer to everything. Even our most cherished convictions may fade into insignificance when we get to heaven.

We might discover that sins we pointed out in others were not nearly as serious as some in our own lives, or that causes to which we gave ourselves were not as crucial to the kingdom of God as we thought. That issues that kept us so preoccupied on earth, and out of sorts with other believers, weren't of eternal significance. We may even be surprised by who is with us in heaven. We will discover that what really mattered had to do with the way we loved God and loved others, and all things we did without love amounted to nothing.

We may discover that why we did things and the way we did things were as important to God as how many things we accomplished for him. Paul says we at best are looking at a reflection, or a photograph. We won't know perfectly till we get to heaven, so let's be a little less sure of ourselves and more confident in God to do what is right.

Paul says that...

Heaven is conditional

Because love is eternal, those without love won't be in heaven. John in his first epistle says love for one another is one of the tests of salvation. Without this love that causes you to live for God and others, there is no hope for heaven. Lovelessness is evidence there has been no work of grace in your life.

As Dallas Willard rightly says that all will be in heaven who want to be there. But only those saved by grace and following Jesus as Lord truly want to be in heaven. These are the ones who have an "inter-active relationship" with the Lord (*The Divine Conspiracy*, 43-50). The rich young man wanted the gift of eternal life, and the prize of heaven as another of his many acquisitions, but didn't want to be in heaven enough to really follow Jesus. Heaven is where God and his Son and his people live, to focus on and delight in one another, and who else would want to be there except those saved by grace, and characterized by love for God and others?

The final question we need to ask ourselves is, "Where am I going?" Am I on my way to heaven, as one who is loved by God, and is called to love him and others, including my brother, my neighbor, and even my enemy?

Conclusion:

So, the first question we must ask ourselves is..."Why?" "Why am I a follower of Christ and identified with his people, the church?" Why am I involved in the fellowship and ministry of the church and the kingdom?

Without love, my church life is zero.

The next question is "What?" "What am I becoming?" Am I becoming more loving, and more like Jesus, who is perfect love? Is my love resulting in obedience to his word rather than emotions and self-centered impulses? Am I going to be happy with what I will be this year and ten or twenty years from today? Is God pleased with what I am becoming?

Without love, my personal Christian character is zero.

The next question our text has raised for us is..."Where?" "Where am I going?" Do I know I'm going to heaven, because I really want to go there? So the question for you and me, non-church folks and even us church members is..."Where?"

Without love we have no hope for eternal life now and eternity in God's kingdom. Without love our so-called Christian hope is zero.

Rather than being just a flowery passage for weddings, this great portrayal of love searches deep into our hearts and lives and challenges us to ask about the quality, even the verity of our Christian faith and professed relationship with Christ.

Now is the time for us to renew ourselves in the love of Jesus, and commit to loving him through loving one another. Perhaps there needs to be a resolve to seek restitution and reconciliation. As my ministry with you draws to a close, it's time to examine if there are broken relationships in the church. Perhaps there's a need to *do* love for one another, and even speak the truth in love to those who are wandering from the truth and the fellowship, and possibly doing harm to the body of Christ.

The vision of IBC is to be people of God who obey the Great Commandment and Great Commission. Until and unless we love God and one another there's no use trying to be a missional people.

Let's resolve to be a people of love—God's love based on his word and in obedience to him, because Christianity without love equals zero.

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Define in your own words agape love. Do you agree with the statement, "Love doesn't define God, but God defines love"? Explain your answer.
2. Can you think of examples of how talented and gifted people can bring more harm than good to the church in their "work for the church" if not done with love? (If you discuss with your group, be careful to not identify individuals!)
3. Discuss love as a part of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 3:12-14). Is it possible to produce the other aspects of the fruit of the Spirit without love? If one has love, will the other aspects then follow? Explain.
4. Read the judgment passage in Matthew 25:31-46. Do you agree that we are saved by grace, but will be judged by our works and fruit? How does your answer "square" with what John writes in 1 John 4:8?
5. What do you think about the quote of Mother Teresa, "I don't do big things. I do small things with big love"? Is this to be our ambition? Why?
6. Can you recount experiences when your love for others resulted in hurt and/or disappointment to you? Was it worth it to have loved them? Why or why not?
7. Pray that the Holy Spirit will help you take a "love inventory" of your life. Is your life producing the fruit of the Spirit, mainly the fruit of love for God and others? Ask him to give you grace to love in practical ways, your family members, fellow believers/church members, neighbors, and work/study associates, even your enemies.

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